



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Displaced selves, dislocated emotions and transforming identities: Syrian refugee women reinventing selves



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Syria
Refugee women
Intersectional identities
Displacement
Dislocation

ABSTRACT

This study presents the voices of four Syrian refugee women to improve the understanding of complexities of human displacement. The interviews were conducted in 2016 in Gaziantep, Turkey, a border city to Aleppo, Syria. The study offers an intersectional framework for approaching identities. While all four women have apparent commonalities, such as their gender, their displacement and the host country/city in which they live, the study examines other important identities that shape their experiences: Afran is Kurdish and transgendered, Nabila is a *niqab*-wearing Sunni Muslim woman who lost her upper-class status after her displacement and has political visions for the future of Syria, Farah is an atheist who removed her hijab and became financially liberated after leaving Syria, and Zeinab is a human rights-defending leftist. The concepts of 'displaced selves' and 'dislocated emotions' are introduced in connection to becoming and belonging beyond physically forced emigration from state borders.

Introduction

Refugee, a term imposed on individuals by a rational-bureaucratic formation of the territorial nation-state's legalistic contours, blurs all personal differences, thereby stripping humans of their subjective experiences. The refugee label turns a human into a one-dimensional person; it conceptually separates her from the place where she originally belonged and displaces her into a space unknown to her, a space that already belongs to another. Being a refugee becomes a reflection of her non-being as she is placed into a land where she is considered not to belong. She is thrown into it by force. The only dimension left for the refugee is space – being in or out of it. Lems (2016) emphasizes that even though there may be disruption or displacement, place is "always where we are and never cease to exist... and plays into the way we see and engage with the world" (Lems, 2016, p.320). By definition, the term 'refugee' objectifies a human to the law of the land, which a refugee is bound by but not part of. In contrast, she is no longer bound by the law of the home country that she left behind, but she is forced to remain part of it. The refugee thus finds herself in an abyss between her home country and her host country in the process of becoming (Heidegger, 1962, 1975 in Lems, 2016, p.322–327). Individual's *becoming and becoming as a continual process* in human life (Benezer & Zetter, 2014; Lems, 2016), is the departure point of this paper to explore ways that displacement shifts, transforms and reinvents self.

Departing from the theoretical basis that 'displacement cannot be

reduced to mobility' (Redclift, 2013, p. 4), this study examines displacement, belonging and individuals' processes of becoming through providing a space within these pages to converse four very differently located and dislocated Syrian refugee women in Gaziantep, Turkey. The voices of refugee women from different walks of life illustrate experiences of belonging and displacement in their experience of becoming. Their experiences are intertwined not only with being placed as refugees but also with the meanings of belonging in the place that they left behind. The four women selected for this paper, though for different reasons, felt on the margins prior to their displacement. The meaning of belonging in their future is linked not only to how the self is located in the new place but also to their relationships with their family and the particularities of the national and transnational communities with which they will interact. Refugees' "articulation of 'home'...has become a space, a community created within the changing links between 'here' and 'there'" (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002, p.6). These four Syrian women illustrate how after displacement women re-frame their identities differently depending on their past and present experiences. They not only provide a glimpse into the highly diverse identities of women in Syria but also demonstrate that displacement must be understood beyond state borders. This paper further argues that exiting a certain country's borders may not be the starting point of being displaced.

Refugees are people who are forced out of the borders of their state. By definition, then, the departure point for displacement begins from human-made limitations in space, i.e., borders (cf. *rootedness* in Malkki,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2018.07.010>

Received 5 March 2018; Received in revised form 3 June 2018; Accepted 19 July 2018

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1995a). According to Malkki, 'to plot only 'places of birth' and degrees of nativeness is to blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them' (Malkki, 1992, p.38). The word 'refugee' has a generally accepted definition of forced expulsion, and labels have implications, creating stereotypes and generalizing people into a cluster (Crawley & Skleparis, 2017; Zetter, 1991, 2007). The four women interviewed describe multiple ways and different time periods in which they experience displacement and (loss of) belonging. Their experiences illustrate the complexities of being placed and being displaced in connection with their intersectional identities. Intersectional identities have complex and multiple dimensions of social relations, such identities are shaped and experienced within a particular social structure and not all subjects share a single subjectivity (McCall, 2005; Oleksy, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

In an era in which refugees have become 'invisible actors,' it is crucial to understand them 'as a *persona*, as a *person*', preserve their subjectivity and recognize their contribution to host societies (Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 2007, p. 283, 295); this can be achieved through exploring people's individual stories, experiences, and standpoints (Malkki, 1995b; Zetter, 1991). Refugees experience displacement in plural ways. Arab [and Kurdish] women are underrepresented in the immigration literature (Killian, Olmsted, & Doyle, 2012). "Refugee" label further creates a challenge in locating women's complex displacement experience coming from the Middle East.

Identities are "becoming, rather than being" (Hall, 1996, p.4) as they are constructed continuously through time (Armbruster, 2002; Hall, 1996). Intersections of transnational mobilizations are gendered as women and men have different access to networks and experience relationships differently both in home and host countries (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Ali & Tas, 2017). This paper focuses on gendered experiences of becoming, belonging and displacement. Gendered expectation of home and host societies reflected in these four women's experience of becoming. From what entails being a female to being a religious female or gendered ways of being part of communal struggles as mothers connect their gender identity to their refugee experience.

"Emotions are culturally constituted, understood, interpreted, managed, and framed" (Navaro-Yashin, 2012, p.133) and they are carried and intersect with new settings and cultures, and the 'becoming' of the individual is built upon a complex emotional stage. One cannot reach self-fulfilment if she does not feel a sense of belonging to a community, as 'creating the feeling of being-part-of... is essential for the possibility of emplacement' (Lems, 2016, p.322). These four Syrian women's narratives are examined in connection to their past and present to highlight the transformative impacts of dislocation and how they responded different ways to reframing their identities.

Context

Syrians' status in Turkey requires a brief discussion, as the participants in this study narrated their experiences within this context. The Turkish government received Syrians as 'guests'. Later, a temporary protection and asylum law was passed, but it has never been fully implemented. Thus, it has failed to ensure a firm status for Syrians (Erensu & Kasli, 2016; Kirisci & Salooja, 2014), making the lives of Syrians in Turkey extremely ambivalent, their future vague and everyday life very difficult (Gumus & Eroğlu, 2015), insecure and precarious (Baban, Ilican, & Rygiel, 2017). The euphemism of initially calling Syrians 'guests' denies them the rights they would have obtained under refugee status (cf. Baban et al., 2017, p.45 and Crawley & Skleparis, 2017, p.11). It further implies that, as 'guests', they are not part of society and should not demand or complain about anything; they should just be thankful and accept what is offered. This label makes them, in a way, Simmelian strangers (Simmel in trans. Wolff, 1950).

Gaziantep, Turkey, where I conducted all four interviews that provide the substance of this paper, is a border city to Aleppo, Syria, and

has one of the largest Syrian refugee populations. While the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey is 3.1 million, this number is close to 400,000 people in Gaziantep (Erdogan, Kavukcu, & Cetinkaya, 2017). Gaziantep's population was close to 2 million before the Syrian civil war started; hence, Syrians formed approximately 20% of the city's overall population. Such change in the demography creates certain tensions with the local population, but it also allows for a flourishing sub-culture that creates not only individual but also communal experiences. In fact, my larger study indicates that many Syrians living in Gaziantep note striking similarities in terms of the landscape of the two cities. As Syrians have a large population in the city, they started to form neighbourhoods that are dominantly Syrian where one can find Syrian shops, bakeries and markets that are run by Arabic speaking owners. While they live as a community and the city has a familiar feel, many refugees are detached from the local community, many do not speak Turkish. Either because they do not find the need as they are connected and mostly interact with the large Syrian community or resist learning Turkish because they are afraid of losing their native tongue and culture or they acquire the help of their offspring who are school children and learn some Turkish in schools. Many Syrians are positioned between being and not being – finding a new home and not being able to call it home.

The dominant global perception is that most Syrians try to flee to Europe, and if they remain in Gaziantep, it only is because of economic limitations that bar them travelling any further. In contrast, many Syrians state that they remain in their country or stay in Gaziantep because it is the closest place geographically and culturally to Syria. Many in the larger study explicitly said that they stay in Gaziantep 'to feel close to home' and 'be among the first to go back home'. Some travel back and forth as they cannot live without going and seeing home. Even in the imagination of the outside gaze, many Syrians are displaced from their self-defined emotional locations. Hence, the narratives of the four women in this study are part of a larger study that presents Syrians' experiences in a host community – Turkey – that constantly clashes with how they are positioned on the global stage as 'Syrian refugees'.

Methods

The participants in this paper were interviewed as part of a larger project for which I interviewed 79 women and men from Syria who currently live in Gaziantep, Turkey. The interviews were conducted between November 2015 and June 2016. Farah was interviewed in January (after she had been living in Gaziantep for three years), Afran in May (two years), Nabila in June (one and a half years), and Zeinab in June 2016 (two years).¹ The semi-structured interview questions were open ended. I asked all participants 10 questions, but I included sub-questions depending on the focus of their narratives. In the larger study, I aimed to understand how they positioned their intersectional identities at a transnational level in a host community. I chose to focus on these four women in examining displacement because they represented four different walks of life that were represented in my larger sample. In total, I conducted six hours of interviews with these four women, approximately an hour and a half with each. I conducted Nabila's interviews with a research assistant who provided Arabic-to-English interpretation, and I conducted the other three in English language directly. The English interview quotes are verbatim. Language access in interactions directly links and impacts the lived experiences of a refugee in a host community. Nabila's presence in this paper also speaks to the existing diversity of expression currently happens in the city of Gaziantep.

The interaction between an interviewee and interviewer is a knowledge construction process, a 'twice-behaved behaviour' (Schechner, 1985 in Hirsch & Smith, 2002, p.9; Ozkaleli & Yilmaz,

¹ All names have been changed for confidentiality.

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